

February 9, 2020

Dealing With Division: Week 3 Division of Gifts

Shepherd's Grace Church

Now concerning spiritual gifts, brothers and sisters, I do not want you to be uninformed. ²You know that when you were pagans, you were enticed and led astray to idols that could not speak. ³Therefore I want you to understand that no one speaking by the Spirit of God ever says 'Let Jesus be cursed!' and no one can say 'Jesus is Lord' except by the Holy Spirit.

⁴ Now there are varieties of gifts, but the same Spirit; ⁵and there are varieties of services, but the same Lord; ⁶and there are varieties of activities, but it is the same God who activates all of them in everyone. ⁷To each is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good. ⁸To one is given through the Spirit the utterance of wisdom, and to another the utterance of knowledge according to the same Spirit, ⁹to another faith by the same Spirit, to another gifts of healing by the one Spirit, ¹⁰to another the working of miracles, to another prophecy, to another the discernment of spirits, to another various kinds of tongues, to another the interpretation of tongues. ¹¹All these are activated by one and the same Spirit, who allots to each one individually just as the Spirit chooses. (1Cor. 12: 1-11)

This is the third in a series of five sermons entitled, *Dealing with Division*. In the first two weeks we have discussed division inside the church. There were many who believed they belonged to Paul because Paul preached a sermon or witnessed to the gospel in such a way as for them to come to faith in Christ. Others believed because of Appolos and others because of Cephas(Peter).

While Peter and Paul were both apostles they were apostles in very different ways; Peter because of a direct call from the incarnate Jesus and Paul because of a direct call from Jesus the Risen Lord. Appolos' credentials for preaching are less clear, nevertheless, his charisma cannot be denied as many people who listened to his witness came to believe in Jesus.

Those who came to faith because of each of these individuals wanted to associate with them in much the same way people in the church today want to affiliate with denominations or even pastors. The division occurs when people forget that Christ is the head of the church and denominations, pastors and doctrine do not define the full measure of God's grace.

Paul's question is, "Has Christ been divided?" Have any others been crucified for our sins or is there any other name that leads to baptism as an affirmation of faith than the name of Jesus. Is any other name an affirmation of God's plan other than the name of Jesus, the very meaning of which is salvation?

The church at Corinth was divided and their division was being noticed outside the walls of the church. Pagans brought the question to Paul, a sure sign that the arguments among the faithful had transcended the church and aroused suspicions in society at large.

As we discussed, the church today suffers the same fate. People outside the church look in and wonder. "Is this the people who profess to love one another? Is this the people who profess to practice charity to all?" In examining Paul's letter to Corinth, it is apparent that not much has changed in church ministry in two thousand years.

Perhaps since not much has changed, the solution to division that Paul offered then might work for the church today. As we think of division, maybe we should remember the cross. On the cross, there is no division. All are sinners there. All hang there with their greatest failures exposed before God and all are forgiven. The church is not perfect. No church is perfect. The church is forgiven and it doesn't matter if inside that church there are gay or straight, slave or free, black or white; all have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God however all...all have been forgiven and all are welcome!

When barriers are placed before people, we can be certain they are not placed by God. God knows no boundary, no border, no wall. Salvation read Jesus is for all! The cross is our bond because in the cross all division is overcome! In the cross, the center beam is pointed up toward God and the cross beam is pointed horizontally representing the connection of the world. On the cross, God and the world are connected and there is no division, no separation.

Last week, we examined chapter 11 of Paul's letter. In that section we examined two sources of division. The first was division between the sexes. At the beginning of the chapter, Paul talks about women being subservient to men. Christ is the head of man, Paul said and man is the head of his wife. For centuries, people have intentionally misinterpreted that passage in order to perpetuate a male dominated hierarchy in the world and in the church.

Paul did not present this teaching, however to form a hierarchy. If he had, he would have started out with God at the top and worked down to women. Instead, Paul starts in the middle with Christ at the head. As we learned last week, however the head does not mean as the ruler. The head from the Hebrew means the beginning or the source. Christ is the source of every man.

Paul is advancing the theory that John seizes upon about forty years later, establishing that in the beginning, at the head of all creation was the Word, the Word which became flesh and walked among us, Jesus who will save us from our sins. That Word is at the head of all creation. Christ, the Messiah is at the head of the creation of all things and that includes man.

In the book of Genesis, Man is given as created as first and woman is taken from man. This is not intended to be interpreted as a superiority of man or as a hierarchy, but as a practical reality. God made man first and then woman. Both, as Paul goes on to establish were made from God. Neither is intended to be superior to the other. There are no customs or traditions in the church that establish a superiority. In fact, Paul wants us to know that even in the early church at Corinth, there were women teaching, preaching, prophesying! There is to be no division between men and women in the work of the church because there is no division in them in the work of Christ.

In Christ, there is no longer slave nor free, Jew nor Greek, MALE NOR FEMALE! All are one in Christ!

Establishing that there is no superiority of the sexes is essential as Paul goes on to establish the more important division he sees in the church. That division is between those who have and those who have nothing. Paul's second point in chapter 11 is that the meal that is the Lord's Supper is a meal to be shared.

Again, it is reported to Paul from outside the church that there are divisions that make the church seem worldly. When the supper is served, and in those days it would have been a full meal, those who brought plenty ate all they had and drank to excess. As a result, some were drunk and others went away hungry. Paul reminds us it is not supposed to be that way!

The Lord's Supper is an invitation to all...to all who will examine themselves and recognize that none are perfect and none are worthy! On the night Jesus is betrayed, he invites all, even those who are about to deny him and betray him. Even those with the greatest sin. All are welcome to come and to share and they are invited to share equally. There is to be no division.

To overcome the division, Christ went to the cross. He took all our sin and shed his blood in place of ours. The cross is that which unifies all of humanity, eliminating hierarchy and power, eliminating distinction between sexes, eliminating rich and poor while reminding us that we are all the same. We are all sinners! We are all saved by grace!

Which brings us to today!

Today, we take on the topic of that which we all possess. Yes, we all possess spiritual gifts. You and I know we possess them. We also know that in the world we live in, it is sometimes easier to deny them or to ignore them. Paul wants the people of Corinth, Paul wants us to be informed about them.

You see, Paul knows the words of the prophet Jeremiah. Paul knows that God knows us while we are still in our mother's womb. Paul knows that before we are born, God knew us. (Jer. 1: 5) and that God created all of us for a purpose. Paul also knows that we humans are created uniquely. We are the only creatures brought to life by the gift of God's breath breathed into us. God's breath, God's ruach, God's Spirit is the very life breath which brings us to existence.

Paul knows that from the very beginning, we, all of us possess the power of God's Holy Spirit and that that Spirit gives us not only life but a purpose for our life. Paul wants the people of Corinth and us to be informed about spiritual gifts.

To become aware of spiritual gifts, we must first become aware of the culture in which we exist. The people of Corinth live in perhaps one of the most diverse cultures in Paul's world. They live in a seaport where new people arrive daily. These new people introduce new ideas, new thoughts, new senses of morality and religion to the Corinthian world. They live in a melting pot!

In that melting pot, they are exposed as Paul tells us to traditions and religious practices that lead them astray. They are enticed by idols that cannot even speak to them. The division Paul wants us to focus on today is the division between those who are willing to know Jesus and those who have never been introduced.

Paul wants to let us know there is nothing wrong with tradition. In his introduction to the Corinthians in chapter 11, Paul reminds them that it is he who has passed along traditions they should cling to; traditions like the Lord's Supper and not like superfluous traditions of covering heads. He wants us to know there are meanings behind every tradition; pagan and Christian.

For example, in the Jewish wedding ceremony, it is a contemporary tradition that at the end of the wedding, the couple step on and shatter a wine glass to invite the guests to know the formal part of the evening is over and it is time for the celebration to begin. Because traditions get passed down, there is more than one explanation for

this tradition, however, one possible explanation goes back to the reference I made earlier regarding the prophet Jeremiah.

While you were still in your mother's womb, I knew you. The tradition expounds upon this thought and speculates that even from our conception, God has a plan for us, a plan to make us prosperous and not to bring us to harm. (Jer. 29: 11) In that plan, God provides for us a person, a spouse to whom we are joined for a lifetime. When the glass is smashed (Here, if you are in service, you will observe that I step on the glass and smash it into several pieces.) it represents the thousands if not millions of pieces of our lives and the possible solutions each one of those broken pieces might lead to.

Tradition invites us to consider that the right fit brings all those pieces back together again in a union which unites two and those two become one. Traditions such as this one and many of the ones Paul has passed down are important. They are important because they remind us of the truth of teachings that have been handed down. They remind us of the truth of the promises God has made.

The problem with traditions as Paul reminded us last week is that some are man made and have no bearing on the promises made by God. Man made traditions such as women covering their heads are cultural norms and can be observed so as not to cloud the issues of God's truths. When they become criteria for participating in worship, however, they should be challenged and abolished.

In our culture, the culture of the United States in the 20th century, it used to be cultural that each person coming to church dressed in their "Sunday Best." Suits and ties were the norm for men, dresses, hats and even gloves for women. This tradition was insisted upon by parents and even by some pastors. Gradually, the tradition was replaced by a more comfortable tradition that promoted acceptance and ease of listening. The church walls did not collapse; the pillars of the pious patriarchs did not fall down. Instead, people assimilated and those who had thousand dollar suits left them at home for another time. Those who had only jeans wore them and all people blended into a worship setting that accepted all.

Just as with head coverings in Paul's day, the tradition of dressing up was recognized in this culture as unnecessary and in fact, a hinderance to the opportunity for worship in an authentic and unencumbered way!

The positive of tradition, as Paul instructs is that it passes on the promises God intends us to know. These promises are ones that God has kept and intends to keep. One tradition that we spoke of last week was the tradition of the Lord's Supper. In this meal, all are called to come, to share, to partake in the Body and the Blood of Jesus. This tradition invites us to examine ourselves, recognize that we are unworthy of such an honor, and repent earnestly and immediately.

Repentance means that we turn from that which we have committed as sin (To sin is an archer's term meaning to "miss the mark.") and re-dedicate our lives to the target which is ever before us; living the life God calls us to. As we repent, we are immediately ready to receive what the lord offers, the meal that is the new covenant in Him.

When we hear the term, "new covenant," we should immediately wonder what was the old covenant and why does it need to be replaced. The Old Covenant was made in the law and can be found in the first five books of the Hebrew Scripture; the Torah. The law was given as God led God's people out of slavery and bondage and into a freedom that the people were not prepared for. We know the people wandered forty years in the wilderness while God instructed and taught a new generation of people what it was to worship and follow the one true God.

Those who received the original covenant all perished in the wilderness and only the next generation of God's chosen crossed over into God's promise given in the Law. As this group of people possessed the Promised Land, they found temptation to the rituals and religions of the indigenous aliens inescapable.

While the first generation perished in the wilderness, unable to accept God's covenant, countless generations perished in the land having never learned the lessons of the Law. For four hundred years, God kept silent while God's chosen created an abomination before him. For four hundred years, God's chosen rejected the words given to Moses on the mountain. This weak and sinful people were unable to step in the new land, a land flowing with milk and honey, without perverting themselves before the Lord!

After Christ was crucified, the ones who recognized him and believed in Him as savior (John 1: 10ff) remembered his promise to them and to all who would accept him. They instituted the tradition of the Lord's Supper to establish the "New Covenant," which would replace the old covenant of law that the people were unable to keep with a reminder that the cross carries all our sins. **AGAIN...THE CROSS CARRIES ALL OUR SINS!** The cross does not just carry the all the sins of me or you; the cross carries the sins of all people.

In Chapter one, we learn that this is folly to the foolish who are perishing, but to us, it is the saving act of God! What we receive when we eat and drink is the very promise of forgiveness given by one who invited even his betrayer to partake!

Paul wanted us to know that traditions are important. So important that we remember this covenant even today and as we think about it we recognize it as the "covenant of the broken." That is right! The new covenant is the covenant of the broken.

Turn your eyes now to the altar and look there at the broken shattered pieces of glass that remain. Imagine them as the broken pieces of our lives. Remember them as all the times we have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God! When we eat the bread and drink the cup, we are joined to Christ as one body. Christ is the head of every person and we are the body. This is our new covenant tradition and we remember it in our individual brokenness that can only be repaired by the one true God! All are broken, all are invited, all are united as one! Christ has died! Christ is risen! Christ will come again!

This tradition opens the door for remembering other traditions. One of these, Paul addresses today. "About Spiritual gifts, I do not want you to be uninformed, Paul says." He phrases his introduction of this tradition in this way to remind us that just as all are invited to come and eat, so too, all are invited to know that each of them, and yes, each of us is given spiritual gifts.

As Paul makes this claim, I believe he returns to the book of Jeremiah where God says, "While you were in your mother's womb, I knew you!" Paul knows that we were formed and made by God before we were born and we were given in that moment gifts that we would need if we were to live the life God intended. Later in the prophet, God says, "I have a plan for you and it is plan not to harm you but bring you to prosperity, a plan to give you a future with hope. (Jer. 29: 11 paraphrased)

In that same book, the prophet speaks for the first time about the new covenant, the "Brit Haddashah," the covenant of the broken. He offers God's pledge to the people who have broken and forgotten God's promise. He says that the people will turn and reject the ways of the culture around them. The people will profess the name of the Lord and will rejoice in God's presence. The covenant of the broken is a covenant reminding all of us that we are shattered in our lives and only God can restore us to our true potential!

Just as God has a plan for the young couple getting married, so too, God has a plan for each of us. His plan is not some Utopian wish to move us to where everything is lollipops and roses, but rather, for us to create our future right where we are and be prosperous in all we do!

To that end, God prepares us, breathing God's breath or Spirit or ruach into us. (Gen. 2: 7) Humans are unique among all of creation as it is only us into whom God breathes God's gift of life! It is that Spirit which Paul identifies as the Spiritual Gifts God gives to each of us.

These gifts are contrasted to gifts of the culture in which we live. According to Paul, some in the Corinthian culture would curse the name of Jesus. Paul says, “no one can curse Jesus if that person possesses the Spirit of God.” It would be impossible or unimaginable! Likewise, no one can profess that Jesus is Lord apart from the Holy Spirit!

The Spirit cannot condemn God and neither can anyone profess God apart from the Holy Spirit. The world today would echo this teaching. There are many who would curse God...seeking to keep God out of schools and courts and places of public gathering. The world would say that God is not welcome here!

Those of us who possess the Holy Spirit, who recognize God’s presence, power and sovereignty in our lives must stand up to this “curse!” We must affirm that God alone controls the world in which we, those of us who are believers, live. God alone orchestrates the presence we claim.

In order to make this claim, we must recognize that we cannot stand alone. Just as we are all called to eat of one loaf and drink of one cup, so we are all called to receive, accept and recognize our Spiritual Gifts. The picture on the front cover of our bulletin this morning is of a broken pitcher. The pitcher has obviously been put back together. It is carefully pieced and glued.

The pitcher represents the broken and shattered pieces of our lives together, pieces carefully put back together so they might be functional. It is important that these pieces be put back together because the pitcher must be able to perform the task for which it was designed. It must hold water or wine. It must pour out for many the gifts of the one.

In the Spirit there are many gifts but they are intended for the one body. The Spirit gives these gifts not according to the needs of the individual, but according to the needs of the community. The division that exists in Corinth is the division over these very gifts. Some want to claim the superiority of their spiritual gift or even deny the gifts of others.

Just as in chapter one, Paul wants us to learn from the lesson shared here. Has Christ been divided? Do we belong to Paul or Appolos or Peter? No! We belong to the one true God who gives all to all through the discernment of God’s Holy Spirit.

To some, the gift of the utterance of wisdom. To some the utterance of knowledge. Is wisdom useful without knowledge? It is easy to be wise enough to see that a window is broken but without the knowledge of how to repair the break, the wisdom is useless. So it is with gifts of faith, healing, prophecy, miracles, discernment of spirits. All are important but they work only in concert with others. All are needed so that all can work together for the good of all.

The argument taking place in the community was one regarding the ability to speak in tongues. Paul saved it for last in the short and incomplete list he provided to the Corinthians. He wanted them to really think about it. If someone is sharing the Word of God but others cannot understand it, how effective is that word. If a preacher stands before you using language so thick and academic that it makes no sense, how much will you get from the message?

Paul wants us to know that when someone speaks in the language of the Spirit, another must be present that understands that language and can interpret it. The gifts of all must be used together so that God’s work can be accomplished. It is only in doing God’s work that the gifts given by God can be fully utilized.

In the pagan community of Corinth, the people were unfamiliar with reliance on one another. They were used to turning to false idols who could not speak to them. Paul needed to impress upon them the need to put aside their prejudice about who gets what gifts and learn to listen to the Spirit through the gifts of all.

Today, in the world we live in, people are speaking so loudly that no one can hear them. It is important that we, the Church, learn to listen to them, to all of them and to recognize that they all have gifts...that we all have gifts essential to bringing about the Kingdom of God!

There are many gifts, we are all one body and the gifts we have, we are given to share...one at work in the Lord! We must recognize that the gifts we have are not to be used to oppose but to unite. The pitcher we see is broken and put back together again. We can see its breaks but when we come together, God smooths those breaks and makes us seamless again. The work of Christ on the cross brings us all together as a new creation from that which was once broken. Amen!